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USDA RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROVIDES NEARLY HALF A MILLION DOLLARS TO SPUR VALUE-ADDED AGRICULTURE & ECONOMIC GROWTH IN MASSACHUSETTS

Following USDA Secretary Ann Veneman's recent announcement of 184 Value-Added Agricultural Development grants in forty states totaling over \$28.7 million in funding, USDA Rural Development State Director for Massachusetts, David Tuttle, arrived at the University of Massachusetts today to deliver a \$499,253 check to the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative President, Arthur Eve. The grant will allow the group to expand markets that focus on forest stewardship, green certified materials and other value-added forest products. Authorized as part of the 2002 Farm Bill, the Value-Added Agricultural Product Market Development Grant Program provides an opportunity to refine agricultural commodities and products in order to increase their value in the marketplace. "Our support of value-added agricultural ventures is only truly successful when coupled with innovative ideas and initiatives like those being developed by the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative," said USDA State Director Tuttle. "This grant benefits not just the cooperative, but the environment, the community, and the local economy."

The Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative, LLC was organized in June 2001 and now includes twenty-seven members that collectively manage 3,500 acres of forestland. In order to become a member of the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative, landowners must hold ten or more acres of forestland in western Massachusetts and have, or be willing to develop, a forest management plan that meets the Forest Stewardship Council's (FSC)

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“green certification” standards. FSC provides an independent assessment of forestry practices to determine if management is sustainable and allows the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative (MWC) to sell forest products with a label showing that their products are from an environmentally friendly operation.

“The organization was created by private landowners with assistance from the UMass Department of Natural Resources Conservation and the support of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR),” said Arthur Eve, President of the Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative. “Cooperative members are especially appreciative of the contributions of Dave Damery and Paul Barten from the University, and Paul Catanzaro and Jennifer Fish, Service Foresters from DCR”. Eve welcomed the federal investment and pointed out that it will enable the cooperative to organize the production and marketing of value-added products from forest materials and develop the organization into a profitable business.

The cooperative will use the funds to, develop and implement niche markets for flooring, timber frame materials, and residual wood products (e.g., bark mulch, firewood, and pallet wood) and expand the MWC database so that it will: (1) provide detailed information on forest material that is available for harvesting from MWC members; (2) monitor forest materials as they are transformed into value added products; (3) organize information needed for the cooperative to function as a business, and (4) link the database with the MWC website so that MWC members and those who work on their land can have password access to information about the property. The USDA grant will also allow the MWC to increase its membership base to 125 members with over 20,000 acres of forest land, assess the market potential for the use of forest based biomass fuels in Southern New England by analyzing supply and cost data for forest based biomass fuels, and hire two full-time employees.

“Initiatives like MWC are an example of how Massachusetts can retain and improve it’s valuable forested landscape, while simultaneously building local rural economies and helping the Commonwealth become more self sufficient in forest products and building materials,” said David Damery, treasurer of the MWC and faculty member at the University of Massachusetts’ Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. “The informal, public – private partnership that has evolved can be a model for other groups and other states to improve their forests too.”

Also on hand for today’s funding presentation were, Dr. Matt Kelty, Head of the University of Massachusetts’ Department of Natural Resources Conservation, Massachusetts Woodlands Cooperative members, David Bowman, Susan Campbell, Richard and Marcia Starkey, and Jennifer Fish, a Service Forester with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation.

USDA Rural Development's mission is to deliver programs in a way that will support increasing economic opportunity and improve the quality of life of rural residents. As a venture capital entity, Rural Development provides equity and technical assistance to finance and foster growth in homeownership, business development, and critical community and technology infrastructure.

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